
Opening Extract from...

The Trouble with Goats and Sheep

Written by Joanna Cannon

Published by The Borough Press

'Part whodunnit, part coming of age, this is a gripping debut about the secrets behind every door'

RACHEL JOYCE

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THE BOROUGH PRESS

The Borough Press
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2016
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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-813216-3

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it, while at times based on historical events and figures, are the work of the author's imagination.

Set in Perpetua Std by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Number Four, The Avenue

21 June 1976

Mrs Creasy disappeared on a Monday.

I know it was a Monday, because it was the day the dustbin men came, and the avenue was filled with a smell of scraped plates.

'What's he up to?' My father nodded at the lace in the kitchen window. Mr Creasy was wandering the pavement in his shirtsleeves. Every few minutes, he stopped wandering and stood quite still, peering around his Hillman Hunter and leaning into the air as though he were listening.

'He's lost his wife.' I took another slice of toast, because everyone was distracted. 'Although she's probably just finally buggered off.'

'Grace Elizabeth!' My mother turned from the stove so quickly, flecks of porridge turned with her and escaped on to the floor.

'I'm only quoting Mr Forbes,' I said, 'Margaret Creasy never came home last night. Perhaps she's finally buggered off.'

We all watched Mr Creasy. He stared into people's gardens, as though Mrs Creasy might be camping out in someone else's herbaceous border.

My father lost interest and spoke into his newspaper. 'Do you listen in on all our neighbours?' he said.

'Mr Forbes was in his garden, talking to his wife. My window was open. It was accidental listening, which is allowed.' I spoke to my father, but addressed Harold Wilson and his pipe, who stared back at me from the front page.

'He won't find a woman wandering up and down the avenue,' my father said, 'although he might have more luck if he tried at number twelve.'

I watched my mother's face argue with a smile. They assumed I didn't understand the conversation, and it was much easier to let them think it. My mother said I was at an *awkward age*. I didn't feel especially awkward, so I presumed she meant that it was awkward for them.

'Perhaps she's been abducted,' I said. 'Perhaps it's not safe for me to go to school today.'

'It's perfectly safe,' my mother said, 'nothing will happen to you. I won't allow it.'

'How can someone just disappear?' I watched Mr Creasy, who was marching up and down the pavement. He had heavy shoulders and stared at his shoes as he walked.

'Sometimes people need their own space,' my mother spoke to the stove, 'they get confused.'

'Margaret Creasy was confused all right.' My father turned to the sports section and snapped at the pages until they were straight. 'She asked far too many questions. You couldn't get away for her rabbiting on.'

'She was just interested in people, Derek. You can feel lonely, even if you're married. And they had no children.'

My mother looked over at me as though she were considering whether the last bit made any difference at all, and then she spooned porridge into a large bowl that had purple hearts all around the rim.

'Why are you talking about Mrs Creasy in the past tense?' I said. 'Is she dead?'

'No, of course not.' My mother put the bowl on the floor. 'Remington,' she shouted, 'Mummy's made your breakfast.'

Remington padded into the kitchen. He used to be a Labrador, but he'd become so fat, it was difficult to tell.

'She'll turn up,' said my father.

He'd said the same thing about next door's cat. It disappeared years ago, and no one has seen it since.

*

Tilly was waiting by the front gate, in a jumper which had been hand-washed and stretched to her knees. She'd taken the bobbles out of her hair, but it stayed in exactly the same position as if they were still there.

'The lady from number eight has been murdered,' I said.

We walked in silence down the avenue, until we reached the main road. We were side by side, although Tilly had to take more steps to keep up.

'Who lives at number eight?' she said, as we waited for the traffic.

'Mrs Creasy.'

I whispered, in case Mr Creasy had extended his search.

'I liked Mrs Creasy. She was teaching me to knit. We did like her, Grace, didn't we?'

'Oh yes,' I said, 'very much.'

We crossed the road opposite the alley next to Woolworth's. It wasn't yet nine o'clock, but the pavements were dusty hot, and I could feel material stick to the bones in my back. People drove their cars with the windows down, and fragments of music littered the street. When Tilly stopped to change her school bag to the other shoulder, I stared into the shop window. It was filled with stainless-steel pans.

'Who murdered her?' A hundred Tillys spoke to me from the display.

'No one knows.'

'Where were the police?'

I watched Tilly speak through the saucepans. 'I expect they'll be along later,' I said, 'they're probably very busy.'

We climbed the cobbles in sandals which flapped on the stones and made us sound like an army of feet. In winter

ice, we clung to the rail and to each other, but now the alley stretched before us, a riverbed of crisp packets and thirsty weeds, and floury soil which dirtied our toes.

'Why are you wearing a jumper?' I said.

Tilly always wore a jumper. Even in scorched heat, she would pull it over her fists and make gloves from the sleeves. Her face was magnolia, like the walls in our living room, and sweat had pulled slippery, brown curls on to her forehead.

'My mother says I can't afford to catch anything.'

'When is she going to stop worrying?' It made me angry, and I didn't know why, which made me even angrier, and my sandals became very loud.

'I doubt she ever will,' said Tilly, 'I think it's because there's only one of her. She has to do twice the worrying, to keep up with everyone else.'

'It's not going to happen again.' I stopped and lifted the bag from her shoulder. 'You can take your jumper off. It's safe now.'

She stared at me. It was difficult to see Tilly's thoughts. Her eyes hid behind thick, dark-rimmed glasses and the rest of her gave very little away.

'Okay,' she said, and took off her glasses. She pulled the jumper over her head, and when she appeared on the other side of the wool, her face was red and blotchy. She handed me the jumper, and I turned it the right way, like my mother did, and folded it over my arm.

'See,' I said, 'it's perfectly safe. Nothing will happen to you. I won't allow it.'

The jumper smelt of linctus and unfamiliar soap. I carried it all the way to school, where we dissolved into a spill of other children.

*

I have known Tilly Albert for a fifth of my life.

She arrived two summers ago in the back of a large, white van, and they unloaded her along with a sideboard and three easy chairs. I watched from Mrs Morton's kitchen, whilst I ate a cheese scone and listened to a weather forecast for the Norfolk Broads. We didn't live on the Norfolk Broads, but Mrs Morton had been there on holiday, and she liked to keep in touch.

Mrs Morton was sitting with me.

Will you just sit with Grace while I have a little lie-down, my mother would say, although Mrs Morton didn't sit very much at all, she dusted and baked and looked through windows instead. My mother spent most of 1974 having a little lie-down, and so I sat with Mrs Morton quite a lot.

I stared at the white van. 'Who's that then?' I said, through a mouthful of scone.

Mrs Morton pressed on the lace curtain, which hung halfway down the window on a piece of wire. It dipped in the middle, exhausted from all the pressing. 'That'll be the new lot,' she said.

'Who are the new lot?'

'I don't know.' She dipped the lace down a little further. 'But I don't see a man, do you?'

I peered over the lace. There were two men, but they wore overalls and were busy. The girl who had appeared from the back of the van continued to stand on the pavement. She was small and round and very pale, like a giant white pebble, and was buttoned into a raincoat right up to her neck, even though we hadn't had rain for three weeks. She pulled a face, as though she were about to cry, and then leant forwards and was sick all over her shoes.

'Disgusting,' I said, and took another scone.

*

By four o'clock, she was next to me at the kitchen table.

I had fetched her over because she had sat on the wall outside her house, looking as though she'd been misplaced. Mrs Morton got the Dandelion and Burdock out, and a new packet of Penguins. I didn't know then that Tilly didn't like eating in front of people, and she held on to the bar of chocolate until it leaked between her fingers.

Mrs Morton spat on a tissue and wiped Tilly's hands, even though there was a tap three feet away. Tilly bit her lip and looked out of the window.

'Who are you looking for?' I said.

'My mother.' Tilly turned back and stared at Mrs Morton, who was spitting again. 'I just wanted to check she's not watching.'

'You're not looking for your father?' said Mrs Morton, who was nothing if not an opportunist.

'I wouldn't know where to look.' Tilly wiped her hands very discreetly on her skirt. 'I think he lives in Bristol.'

'Bristol?' Mrs Morton put the tissue back into her cardigan sleeve. 'I have a cousin who lives in Bristol.'

'Actually, I think it might be Bournemouth,' said Tilly.

'Oh,' Mrs Morton frowned, 'I don't know anyone who lives there.'

'No,' Tilly said, 'neither do I.'

*

We spent our summer holiday at Mrs Morton's kitchen table. After a while, Tilly became comfortable enough to eat with us. She would spoon mashed potato into her mouth very slowly, and steal peas as we squeezed them from their shells, sitting over sheets of newspaper on the front-room carpet.

'Don't you want a Penguin or a Club?' Mrs Morton was always trying to force chocolate on to us. She had a tin-full in the pantry and no children of her own. The pantry was cavernous and heaved with custard creams and fingers of fudge, and I often had wild fantasies in which I would find myself trapped in there overnight and be forced to gorge myself to death on Angel Delight.

'No, thank you,' Tilly said through a very small mouth, as if she were afraid that Mrs Morton might sneak something in there when no one was looking. 'My mother said I shouldn't eat chocolate.'

'She must eat something,' Mrs Morton said later, as we

watched Tilly disappear behind her front door, 'she's like a little barrel.'

*

Mrs Creasy was still missing on Tuesday, and she was even more missing on Wednesday, when she'd arranged to sell raffle tickets for the British Legion. By Thursday, her name was being passed over garden fences and threaded along the queue at shop counters.

What about Margaret Creasy, then? someone would say. And it was like firing a starting pistol.

My father spent his time stored away in an office on the other side of the town, and always had to have the day explained to him when he got home. Yet each evening, my mother still asked my father if he had heard any news about Mrs Creasy, and each evening he would sigh from the bottom of his lungs, shake his head, and go and sit with a bottle of pale ale and Kenneth Kendall.

*

On Saturday morning, Tilly and I sat on the wall outside my house and swung our legs like pendulums against the bricks. We stared over at the Creasys' house. The front door was ajar, and all the windows were open, as if to make it easier for Mrs Creasy to find her way back inside. Mr Creasy was in his garage, pulling boxes from towers of cardboard, and examining their contents one by one.

'Do you think he murdered her?' said Tilly.

'I expect so,' I said.

I paused for a moment, before I allowed the latest bulletin to be released. 'She disappeared without taking any shoes.'

Tilly's eyes bulged like a haddock. 'How do you know that?'

'The woman in the Post Office told my mother.'

'Your mother doesn't like the woman in the Post Office.'

'She does now,' I said.

Mr Creasy began on another box. With each one, he was becoming more chaotic, scattering the contents at his feet and whispering an uncertain dialogue to himself.

'He doesn't look like a murderer,' said Tilly.

'What does a murderer look like?'

'They usually have moustaches,' she said, 'and are much fatter.'

The smell of hot tarmac pinched at my nose and I shifted my legs against the warmth of the bricks. There was nowhere to escape the heat. It was there every day when we awoke, persistent and unbroken, and hanging in the air like an unfinished argument. It leaked people's days on to pavements and patios and, no longer able to contain ourselves within brick and cement, we melted into the outside, bringing our lives along with us. Meals, conversations, discussions were all woken and untethered and allowed outdoors. Even the avenue had changed. Giant fissures opened on yellowed lawns and paths felt soft and unsteady. Things which had been solid and reliable were now pliant and uncertain. Nothing felt sure any more. The bonds which

held things together were destroyed by the temperature – this is what my father said – but it felt more sinister than that. It felt as though the whole avenue was shifting and stretching, and trying to escape itself.

A fat housefly danced a figure of eight around Tilly's face. 'My mum says Mrs Creasy disappeared because of the heat.' She brushed the fly away with the back of her hand. 'My mum says the heat makes people do strange things.'

I watched Mr Creasy. He had run out of boxes and was crouched on the floor of his garage, still and silent, and surrounded by debris from the past.

'I think it probably does,' I said.

'My mum says it needs to rain.'

'I think she's probably right.'

I looked at the sky, which sat like an ocean above our heads. It wouldn't rain for another fifty-six days.

St Anthony's

27 June 1976

On Sunday, we went to church and asked God to find Mrs Creasy.

My parents didn't ask, because they were having a lie-in, but Mrs Morton and I sat near the front so God could hear us better.

'Do you think it will work?' I whispered to her, as we knelt on the slippery cushions.

'Well, it won't do any harm,' she said.

I didn't understand much of what the vicar was talking about, but he smiled at me from time to time, and I tried to look sinless and interested. The church smelt of wax and old paper, and gave us shelter from a fat sun. The wooden ribs in the roof arched over the congregation, soaking heat and sweat into cool, dry stone, and I shivered under a cotton dress. We had divided ourselves out in the pews, to

make it look full, but I edged towards Mrs Morton and the warmth of her cardigan. She held out her hand and I took it, even though I was too old.

The vicar's words rumbled on the stone like distant thunder.

'I will be found by you,' declared the Lord, 'and I will bring you back from captivity.'

I watched a bead of sweat make a path down Mrs Morton's temple. It was easy to drift off in church if you angled yourself properly.

'I will pursue them with the sword, famine and plague. For they have not listened to my words.'

That caught my attention.

'Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name and when they call to me, I will answer them.'

I stared at the thick, gold cross on the altar. It reflected every one of us: the pious and the ungodly; the opportunist and the devout. Each of us had our reasons for being there, quiet and expectant, and secreted between the pages of a hymn book. How would God manage to answer us all?

'Lamb of God,' said the vicar, 'who taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.'

And I wondered if we were asking God to find Mrs Creasy, or just asking Him to forgive her for disappearing in the first place.

*

We walked outside into buttery sunshine. It had spread itself over the graves, bleaching the stones and picking out

the names of the dead. I watched it creep up the walls of the church until it reached the stained-glass windows, where it threw splinters of scarlet and purple into a cloudless sky. Mrs Morton and her hand had been absorbed by a clutch of efficient women in hats, and so I wandered around the churchyard in careful, horizontal lines, in case anyone was to be accidentally stepped upon.

I liked the feel of the ground beneath my shoes. It seemed safe and experienced, as though all the bones that were buried there had made wisdom grow in the soil. I walked past Ernests and Mauds and Mabels, now beloved and remembered only by the dandelions which grew across their names, until a neat gravel path brought me to the chancel. The graves here were so old, lichen had eaten into who they used to be, and rows of forgotten people stared back at me from headstones that stooped and stumbled like drunks in the earth.

I sat on newly mown grass, behind a grave which was patterned with whorls of green and white. I knew the women in hats were inclined to be time-consuming and I began to make a daisy chain. I had arrived at my fifth daisy when the chancel door opened and the vicar appeared. The breeze caught the edge of his surplice, and he billowed like sheets on a washing line. I watched him march across the graveyard to retrieve an empty crisp packet, and when he returned to the doorway, he took off his shoe and banged it on the church door to get rid of the grass cuttings.

I didn't realize something like that would be allowed.

'Why do people disappear?' I said to him, from behind the gravestone. He didn't stop banging, but slowed down and looked over his shoulder.

I realized he couldn't see me. I stood up.

'Why do people disappear?' I said again.

The vicar replaced his shoe and walked over to me. He was taller than he had been in church and very earnest. The lines on his forehead were carved and heavy, as though his face had spent its entire time trying to sort out a really big problem. He didn't look at me, but stared out over the gravestones instead.

'Many reasons,' he said eventually.

It was a rubbish answer. I'd found that answer all by myself and I didn't even have God to ask.

'Such as?'

'They wander from the path. They drift off-course.' He looked at me and I squinted up at him through the sunshine. 'They become lost.'

I thought about the Ernests and the Mauds and the Mabels. 'Or they die,' I said.

He frowned and repeated my words. 'Or they die,' he said.

The vicar smelt exactly the same as the church. Faith had been trapped within the folds of his clothes, and my lungs were filled with the scent of tapestry and candles.

'How do you stop people from disappearing?' I said.

'You help them to find God.' He shifted his weight and

gravel crunched around his shoes. 'If God exists in a community, no one will be lost.'

I thought about our estate. The unwashed children who spilled from houses and the drunken arguments that tumbled through windows. I couldn't imagine God spent very much time there at all.

'How do you find God?' I said, 'where is He?'

'He's everywhere. Everywhere.' He waved his arms around to show me. 'You just have to look.'

'And if we find God, everyone will be safe?' I said.

'Of course.'

'Even Mrs Creasy?'

'Naturally.'

A crow unfolded itself from the roof of the church, and a murderous cry filled the silence.

'I don't know how God can do that,' I said. 'How can He keep us from disappearing?'

'You know that the Lord is our shepherd, Grace. We are just sheep. Only sheep. If we wander off the path, we need God to find us and bring us home.'

I looked down at my feet whilst I thought about it. Grass had buried itself in the weave of my socks and dug sharp, red lines into my flesh.

'Why do people have to die?' I said, but when I looked up, the vicar was back at the chancel door.

'Are you coming for tea at the church hall?' he shouted.

I didn't really want to. I would rather have gone back to Tilly. Her mother didn't believe in organized religion and

was worried we'd all be brainwashed by the vicar, but I had to agree, or it would have been a bit like turning down Jesus.

'Okay,' I said, and picked the blades of grass from my knees.

*

I walked behind Mrs Morton, along the lane between the church and the hall. The verge was thick with summer: stitchwort and buttercups, and towering foxgloves which blew clouds of pollen from rich, purple bells. The breeze had dropped, leaving us in a razor of heat which cut into the skin at the tops of my arms and made speaking too much of an effort. We trudged in a single line; silent pilgrims drawn towards a shrine of tea and digestives, all strapped into Sunday clothes and decorated with sweat.

When we reached the car park, Tilly was sitting on the wall. She was basted in sun cream and wore a sou'wester.

'It was the only hat I could find,' she said.

'I thought your mother didn't want you to be religious?' I held out my hand.

'She's gone to stack shelves in the Co-op,' Tilly said, and heaved herself down from the bricks.

The church hall was a low, white building, which squatted at the end of the lane and looked as though it had been put there whilst someone made their mind up about what to do with it. Inside, it rattled with teacups and efficiency.

Sunday heels clicked on a parquet floor and giant, stainless-steel urns spat and hissed to us from the corner.

'I'm going to have Bovril,' said Tilly.

I studied Mrs Morton, as she ordered our drinks on the other side of the room. Early widowhood had forced her to weave a life from other people's remnants, and she had baked and minded and knitted herself into a glow of indispensability. I wondered who Mrs Morton would be if she still had a husband – if Mr Morton hadn't been searching for The New Seekers in the footwell of his car and driven himself head-first into the central reservation of the M4. There had been a female passenger (people whispered), who appeared at the funeral in ankle-length black and crimson lipstick, and who sobbed with such violence she had to be escorted from the church by an anxious sexton. I remembered none of this. I was too young. I had only ever known Mrs Morton as she was now; tweeded and scrubbed, and rattling like a pebble in a life made for two.

'Bovril.' Mrs Morton handed a cup to Tilly. We all knew she wouldn't drink it, but we kept up the pretence, even Tilly, who held it to her face until steam crept over her glasses.

'Do you believe in God, Mrs Morton?' I looked up at her.

Tilly and I both waited.

She didn't reply immediately, but her eyes searched for an answer in the beams of the ceiling. 'I believe in not

asking people daft questions on a Sunday morning,' she said eventually, and went to find the toilet.

The hall filled with people. It was far more crowded than the church had been, and pairs of jeans mixed with Sunday best. It appeared that Jesus pulled a much bigger crowd if He provided garibaldis. There were people from our avenue – the Forbeses and the man who was always mowing his lawn, and the woman from the corner house, who was surrounded by a clutter of children. They clung to her hips and her legs, and I watched as she slipped biscuits into her pocket. Everyone stood with newspapers in their armpits and sunglasses on their foreheads and, in the corner, someone's Pomeranian was having an argument with a Border Collie. People were talking about the water shortage and James Callaghan, and whether Mrs Creasy had turned up yet. She hadn't.

No one mentioned Jesus.

In fact, I didn't think anyone would have noticed if Jesus had walked into the room, unless He happened to be accompanied by an Arctic roll.

*

'Do you believe in God?' I asked Tilly.

We sat in a corner of the hall, on blue plastic chairs which pulled the sweat from our skin, Tilly sniffing her Bovril and me drawing my knees to my chest, like a shield. I could see Mrs Morton in the distance, trapped by a trestle table and two large women in flowered aprons.

'Probably,' she said. 'I think God saved me when I was in hospital.'

'How do you know that?'

'My mum asked Him to every day.' She frowned into her cup. 'She went off Him after I got better.'

'You've never told me. You always said you were too young to remember.'

'I remember that,' she said, 'and I remember it was Christmas and the nurses wore tinsel in their hair. I don't remember anything else.'

She didn't. I had asked – many times. It was better for children if they didn't know all the facts, she'd said, and the words always left her mouth in italics.

When she first told me, it was thrown into the conversation with complete indifference, like a playing card. I had never met anyone who had nearly died, and in the beginning the subject was attacked with violent curiosity. Then it became more than fascination. I needed to know everything, so that all the details might be stitched together for protection. As if hearing the truth would somehow save us from it. If I had almost died, I would have an entire speech to use at a moment's notice, but Tilly only remembered the tinsel and something being wrong with her blood. It wasn't enough – even when I connected all the words together, like a prayer.

After she told me, I had joined her mother in a silent conspiracy of watchfulness. Tilly was watched as we ran under a seamless August sky; a breathless look over my

shoulder, waiting for her legs to catch up with mine. She was protected from a baked summer by my father's golfing umbrella, a life lived far from the edges of kerbs and the cracks in pavements, and when September carried in mist and rain, she was placed so close to the gas fire, her legs became tartanned in red.

I watched her without end, inspecting her life for the slightest vibration of change, and yet she knew none of this. My worries were noiseless; a silent obsession that the only friend I had ever made would be taken from me, just because I hadn't concentrated hard enough.

*

The noise in the hall drifted into a slur of voices. It was a machine, ticking over in the heat, fuelled by rumour and judgement, and we stared into an engine of cooked flesh and other people's feet. Mr Forbes stood in front of us, sailing a cherry Bakewell through the air and giving out his opinion, as warmth crept into the material of his shirt.

'He woke up on Monday morning and she'd gone. Vanished.'

'Beggars belief,' said Eric Lamb, who still had grass cuttings on the bottom of his trousers.

'Live for the moment, that's what I say.' I watched Mr Forbes sail another cherry Bakewell around, as if to demonstrate his point.

Mrs Forbes didn't speak. Instead, she shuffled her sandals

on the herringbone floor, and twisted a teacup around in its saucer. Her face had worried itself into a pinch.

Mr Forbes studied her, as he disappeared his cherry Bakewell. 'Stop whittling about it, Dorothy. It's got nothing to do with that.'

'It's got everything to do with that,' she said, 'I just know it.'

Mr Forbes shook his head. 'Tell her, Eric,' he said, 'she won't listen to me.'

'That's all in the past. This will be about something else. A bit of a tiff, that's what it'll be,' said Eric Lamb. I thought his voice was softer, and edged with comfort, but Mrs Forbes continued to shuffle, and she trapped her thoughts behind a frown.

'Or the heat,' said Mr Forbes, patting his belly to ensure the cherry Bakewells had safely arrived at their destination. 'People do strange things in this kind of weather.'

'That's it,' said Eric Lamb, 'it'll be the heat.'

Mrs Forbes looked up from her twisting teacup. Her smile was very thin. 'We're a bit buggered if it isn't, though, aren't we?' she said.

The three stood in silence. I saw a stare pass between them, and Mr Forbes dragged the crumbs from his mouth with the back of a hand. Eric Lamb didn't speak. When the stare reached his eyes, he looked at the floor to avoid taking it.

After a while, Mrs Forbes said, 'this tea needs more milk,' and she disappeared into a wall of sunburned flesh.

I tapped Tilly on the arm, and a spill of Bovril escaped on to blue plastic.

'Did you hear that?' I said. 'Mrs Forbes said they're all buggered.'

'That's not very church hall-ey, is it?' said Tilly, who still wore her sou'wester. She wiped the Bovril with the edge of her jumper. 'Mrs Forbes has been a little unusual lately.'

This was true. Only the day before, I'd seen her wandering around the front garden in a nightdress, having a long conversation with the flower beds.

It's the heat, Mr Forbes had said, as he took her back inside with a cup of tea and the *Radio Times*.

'Why do people blame everything on the heat?' said Tilly.

'It's easier,' I said.

'Easier than what?'

'Easier than telling everyone the real reasons.'

*

The vicar appeared.

We knew he had arrived even before we saw him, because all around the room, conversations began to cough and falter. He cut through the crowd, leaving it to re-form behind him, like the surface of the Red Sea. He appeared to glide beneath his cassock, and there was an air of stillness about him, which made everyone he approached seem overactive and slightly hysterical. People stood a little straighter as they shook his hand, and I saw Mrs Forbes do what appeared to be a small curtsy.

'What did he say in church then?' said Tilly, as we watched him edge around the room.

'He said that God runs after people with knives if they don't listen to Him properly.'

Tilly sniffed her Bovril again. 'I never knew He did that,' she said eventually.

Sometimes I struggled to take my gaze from her. She was almost transparent, as fragile as glass. 'He said that if we find God, He'll keep us all safe.'

Tilly looked up. There was a streak of sun cream on the very tip of her nose. 'Do you think someone else is going to disappear, Gracie?'

I thought about the gravestones and Mrs Creasy, and the fractured, yellow lawns.

'Do we need God to keep us safe? Are we not safe just as we are?' she said.

'I'm not sure that I know any more.'

I watched her, and threaded my worries like beads.

*

The vicar completed his circuit of the room and disappeared, as if he were a magician's assistant, behind a curtain next to the stage. The engine of conversation started again, small at first, and uncertain, then powering up to its previous level, as the air filled with hosepipe bans and stories of vanishing neighbours.

It probably would have stayed that way. It probably would have run its course, and continued until people wandered

home to fill themselves with Brussels sprouts, had Mr Creasy not burst through the double doors and marched the length of the hall past a startled audience. Silence followed him around the room, leaving only the click of a cup on a saucer, and the sound of elbows nudging each other.

He stopped in front of Mr Forbes and Eric Lamb, his face stretched with anger. Tilly said afterwards that she thought he was going to hit someone, but to me he looked as though all the hitting had been frightened out of him.

The words stayed in his eyes for a few seconds, then he said, 'You told her, didn't you?'

It was a whisper that wanted to be a shout, and it left his mouth wrapped in spit and fury.

Mr Forbes turned from their audience, and guided Mr Creasy towards a wall. I heard him say *Christ* and *calm down* and *for heaven's sake*, and then I heard him say, 'We haven't told her anything.'

'Why else would she up and leave?' said Mr Creasy. The rage seemed to immobilize him, and he became a furious effigy, fixed and motionless, except for the flush which crept from beneath his shirt and into his neck.

'I don't know,' said Mr Forbes, 'but if she's found out, it's not come from us.'

'We're not that stupid,' said Eric Lamb. He looked over his shoulder at a sea of teacups and curiosity. 'Let's get you out of here, let's get you a drink.'

'I don't want a bloody drink.' Mr Creasy hissed at them, like a snake. 'I want my wife back.'

He had no choice. They escorted him out of the hall, like prison guards.

I watched Mrs Forbes.

She stared at the door long after it had closed behind them.